Watercress Line's New Workshops

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The railway announced the award of the HLF grant of £550,000 at the end of September 2008, towards a project expected to cost over £1.1m in total. It was agreed to split the project into two phases, the first of which is now complete at a cost of about £450,000, with the HLF funding some £210,000. In addition to the construction of two new workshops, one for boiler work and one for carriage & wagon restoration and maintenance, the scheme involved the employment of up to five new members of staff, two of whom were to be apprentices – one in the boiler department and one as a joiner / carpenter.

The very difficult financial situation in late 2008 prompted a search for additional external funding. The railway was delighted to be awarded a grant of £9,500 from the BAT Legacy Fund. This was specifically to cover the 50% of the apprentices' costs not paid for by the HLF. Thus these two new young apprentices are fully funded by external grants, for which we, and they, are extremely grateful. The railway is very aware of the need to pass on key skills to the younger generation.

The railway has also taken on a skilled joiner / carpenter who will be responsible for restoration of three old wooden bodied coaches, the renovation for public appreciation of a wooden signal box and the training of one apprentice. Appointment of the other two members of staff for education and interpretation will take place later.

The two new workshops have large viewing galleries that will incorporate interpretation materials to explain to the visitors the tasks being undertaken in the workshops. This meets one of the HLF's key objectives of heritage education for our visitors.

The railway has employed several local businesses to provide professional support in terms of architect, structural engineer, quantity surveyor etc. Detailed design was completed in Autumn 2008 and a tender process undertaken. This resulted in the selection of Conja, a company based in Headbourne Worthy, as main contractor.

A contract was awarded in Spring 2009 and work started in July. The boiler workshop was essentially complete by early October when the focus moved to the Carriage & Wagon workshop, the bulk of which was finished by the end of the year, on time and on budget.

The timing of the second phase of the project is dependent upon when the railway's finances have recovered sufficiently from the expenditure of some £250,000 on this current phase; with ongoing salary obligations to the new members of staff. However, it is expected to complete the project by 2012.

This is the third grant awarded by the HLF to the Watercress Line. The Old Goods Shed at Alresford was restored with the aid of a substantial grant and re-opened 10 years ago, and the Ropley wheel drop shed was built in 2005.

David Snow, who has co-ordinated the project, said: "We are extremely grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund for making this award, and to their flexibility in working with the railway to cope with the financial pressures of last year. Thanks are also due to the BAT Legacy fund for their contribution to the costs of employing our two apprentices. We are delighted with the excellent working relationship with the main contractor Conja, which has in no small way been due to the close liaison between their project manager Dave Allam and Andy Netherwood the railway's boiler foreman. The railway has

struggled with inadequate working and visitor conditions for many years, and these new facilities (together with those anticipated under phase two) will make a huge difference. They will also make working on the Watercress Line much more attractive to our engineering volunteers."

Stuart McLeod, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in the South East, said: "We're delighted to see the Mid Hants Railway complete the first phase of its work. We hope that, having braved the challenging economic situation of the last eighteen months they will be able to take the project forward to phase two to realise their full plans for the railway and its visitors."

Andy Netherwood, Boiler Department Foreman, is one beneficiary of the better working conditions. He said: "I am delighted with the new facilities, which put the Mid Hants Railway into a different league when it comes to boiler repairs. We will now be able to do much more work in house, and enter into contracts with other railways. I am really looking forward working in this new purpose built environment."

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, since 1994 it has not only revitalised hundreds of museums, parks, historic buildings, landscapes and wildlife sites, but has also given new meaning to heritage itself. People from every walk of life are now involved with the heritage that inspires them, making choices about what they want to keep and share from the past, for future generations. HLF has supported more than 33,900 projects, allocating over £4.4billion across the UK, including £428million to more than 3,000 projects across the South East England region alone.

The Mid Hants Railway, or Watercress Line as commonly known, is Hampshire's only main land standard gauge heritage railway, running for 10 miles through idyllic countryside between the market towns of Alton and Alresford. Originally part of British Railways until closure in 1973, the line and services were fully reinstated in

1985 under the Mid Hants Railway. Today, the Watercress Line is one of the South's premier visitor attractions. The railway employees 27 staff, but is supported by over 450 dedicated volunteers without which, the Railway could not function. We are committed to preserving Hampshire's railway heritage and maintain a fleet of Steam and Diesel Locomotives, rolling stock and infrastructure that creates the essence of a bygone age. We provide a comprehensive service timetable which includes many special events such as 'A Day out with Thomas', 'Ivor the Engine' and 'War on the Line'. Our other services include The Real Ale Train (RAT),

The Watercress Belle and the Countryman Dining Trains is a limited company supported by the MHRPS registered charity. The Mid Hants Railway received some 150k visitors in 2009 with a turnover in excess of £2m. www.watercressline.co.uk

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